



Living with Vermiculite

Basic facts and tips for Libby residents

October 2003



Are you a homeowner, contractor, or other service provider who is likely to run into vermiculite in or around your home or work environment?

If so, or if you don't know, please read these basic tips. This handout provides information you need to protect your health and environment.

In Libby, residents should assume that all vermiculite they find came from the W. R. Grace Mine and may contain asbestos.

While inhalation of asbestos is hazardous to human health, with proper precautions, it is possible to live safely with this material.

What Types of Activities are Potential Risks?

Examples of work that could expose you to asbestos include:

- accessing or working in attics insulated with vermiculite (such as when installing electrical wiring),
- cutting into or disturbing walls or subfloors that may contain vermiculite insulation (such as when remodeling),
- cutting into plaster that may have been mixed with vermiculite, or
- disturbing soils known to contain vermiculite.

At some Libby properties, EPA will choose to leave vermiculite in place. This will only be done if the material is well-contained, such as inside a wall or a non-accessible attic space. EPA may also act to further seal the material in place. If this decision is made at your property, you will be told about it during the cleanup.



EPA will give you instructions on making sure the material remains contained. This is information you will want to share with any contractor doing work on your home, or a potential buyer so they can take precautions if their work will disturb vermiculite.

It is possible that you may later discover vermiculite that was not known to you or found by EPA during the investigation. In all of these instances, it is important to know what to do to minimize your risk of exposure to potential asbestos-containing materials.

About the Risk....

Nearly everyone is exposed to some level of asbestos throughout their lives, and yet the rate of health effects is generally very low. Asbestos is a naturally occurring material and was used for decades in manufacturing many products, such as building materials and brake pads. In Libby, vermiculite insulation and vermiculite-containing soils are of primary concern, because they contain a type of asbestos that is more toxic than other types of asbestos.

Although all asbestos is hazardous, it is important to keep potential exposures in perspective. Even though contacting or working near vermiculite or other asbestos-containing materials can release asbestos fibers into the air, if such exposures are infrequent or for short durations, they will not likely significantly increase your risk of health effects, especially if common-sense precautions are taken.



Remember, most of the health effects seen in Libby today are the result of high-level, ongoing exposures that occurred decades ago. Many of these exposures were related to work at the mine, that has ceased, and to highly contaminated areas (such as the vermiculite piles) that have been or are in the process of being cleaned up by EPA. The materials remaining pose far less risk, especially if homeowners are aware and avoid contacting or disturbing them. EPA continues to identify, remove, and isolate these materials as rapidly as possible.

Whenever Possible, Just Leave It Alone...

EPA strongly recommends that any vermiculite be left alone and undisturbed. It is likely to contain asbestos. ***If well-contained and undisturbed, vermiculite insulation poses no risk to an occupant of a building.*** However, if disturbed, potentially dangerous exposure may occur. The bigger and more frequent the disturbance, the greater the risk.

There are no certain guidelines on what is or is not safe.

Removing Vermiculite

It is not against the law for a homeowner to conduct asbestos abatement work in his or her home. However, EPA strongly recommends that any work requiring significant disturbance of asbestos-containing materials, such as removal of attic insulation, be done by trained and licensed asbestos professionals. This will ensure that the work is done safely and that contamination is not spread throughout the property.

If you are considering work in your home during which you may disturb or remove vermiculite insulation or other asbestos-containing materials, EPA recommends that you first contact the **Montana Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) Asbestos Control Program at (406) 444-3490**. MDEQ can give guidance on permitting and licensing requirements for your unique situation and provide practical information to help make the work safer.



If You Must Disturb Vermiculite....

In some situations where disturbance of vermiculite will be very slight, EPA understands that it may be practical and acceptable for homeowners or general contractors to conduct the work. Examples of this are small breaches of walls containing vermiculite or working for a very short time in or around soils that may contain vermiculite.

If a person must work in or otherwise disturb areas known or suspected to contain vermiculite, a few simple steps can greatly reduce or eliminate potential exposure:

- **Minimize disturbance.** Place plastic sheeting over vermiculite in an attic and tape down the edges. Also, minimize time spent there and do not allow children to play in an attic with open areas of vermiculite. Work in vermiculite-containing soils only when necessary, and avoid spreading materials to other areas.
- **Choose the safest access route.** Access attics in ways that minimize or eliminate release of vermiculite into the home. An outside access to the attic is preferable.
- **Avoid storage in the attic.** If material *must* be stored, enclose it in garbage bags, remove the bags through an outside access, and open them outdoors to avoid spreading contamination in the home. Minimize trips to the attic.
- **Work in damp or wet conditions.** Minimize suspension of dust indoors by keeping the work area damp. If working outside in soils, keeping the area wet will also minimize dust.

The waste material generated may require disposal in a certified asbestos landfill, and there are licensing and permitting requirements for transportation and disposal. The Lincoln County Department of Environmental Health can provide guidance on these requirements.

Common dust or surgical masks are not effective against asbestos fibers! Wearing a respirator with a HEPA filter is the best way to avoid breathing asbestos fibers. However, they must be used properly, or exposure may still occur! For information on respirator requirements, visit the OSHA's website: www.osha.gov/SLTC/respiratoryprotection.



Cleaning Up a Small Release of Vermiculite

If a small amount of vermiculite is disturbed or released in your home, EPA recommends that the area be vacuumed using a vacuum cleaner equipped with a high efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filter. Surfaces that can't be vacuumed should be wiped down with a wet cloth or tacky dusting cloth. ***Vacuuming with a regular vacuum cleaner may spread contaminated dust!***

EPA plans to provide HEPA vacuums to all property owners who undergo cleanup. Use of HEPA vacuums and wet-wiping of surfaces will eliminate nearly all asbestos that could be reintroduced into a living space. All HEPA vacuum cleaners are labeled as such. They also have an additional filter that must be changed regularly.



If you don't know if your vacuum cleaner is a HEPA vacuum, please call the EPA Information Center for advice on how to find out.



If you accidentally encounter vermiculite, don't panic!
Short-duration, low-level exposures are generally not of concern.
Assess the situation and follow the guidelines discussed here.

Need More Information?

If you would like more information on asbestos, identifying or dealing with vermiculite, or the work being done by EPA in Libby, please contact:

- EPA Information Center, 501 Mineral Avenue, 406-293-6194, or
- Wendy Thomi, EPA Community Involvement Coordinator, 406-457-5037 or toll free at 1-866-457-2690.

Please visit these websites for more information:

- U.S. EPA, Region 8, Libby Cleanup site www.epa.gov/region8/superfund/libby/index.html
- Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) Libby site www.atsdr.cdc.gov

Finally, EPA has prepared a booklet entitled ***Libby Asbestos Superfund Site: Community Information and Involvement for Libby Residents*** that contains information on asbestos basics, health risks, physical and mental health resources, ways to deal with asbestos, finding an asbestos specialist, sampling and analysis, EPA's cleanup activities, and contacts and resources. It is available at the EPA Information Center.

This mailing was sent to all postal patrons in Libby. EPA also has a mailing list for distributing site-related information. If this is the first mailing you have received, then you are probably not on the EPA list. If you are interested in being added to the list, please call the EPA Information Center (293-6194). This will ensure that you don't miss out on any information.



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